

# 4

## UNDERSTANDING YOUR AUDIENCE

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### 4.1 Why Choose an Audience Segment?

One of the main tenets of the Tools for Engaging Landowners Effectively (TELE) method is to design programs and messages to appeal to a specific audience segment, i.e., a particular type of landowner. Landowners are not monolithic; they have different knowledge levels, needs, resources, attitudes, and values. Focusing your outreach on a specific type of landowner is the key to developing effective programming and messaging.

The logic behind targeting is simple: If you don't know whom you're talking to, how will you know what they need and what you should say?

In practice targeting outreach to specific landowner segments improves your effectiveness and efficiency in three ways:

- 1. Better Programs.** It allows you to tailor the desired behavior and program support to landowners' knowledge and readiness levels. For example, knowing whether your landowners are likely to implement a particular management activity themselves or hire vendors is important for determining what kinds of advice and support they'll need through the process.
- 2. Better Messages.** It enables you to develop messages that speak more directly to their needs and preferences, thus making it more likely that your message will get their attention and persuade them.
- 3. Better Reach.** You can use more focused channels to reach the landowners whom you really want, so the overall return on your outreach investment is higher. Moreover, when you use targeted channels, people know that you are talking especially to them and understand that your message is relevant for them.

For example, let's say you want landowners in your area to help you curb a new invasive species by reporting occurrences and taking early action. The first thing you might determine is that people who already have management plans and want to be

local conservation leaders are best suited to take this action and to carry your message to their friends and neighbors. You also decide that this group will be willing to attend a presentation to learn more about this topic.

Consider the following taglines for a flier promoting a presentation on this topic:

#### Option 1:

**Your woods are under threat.  
Come learn how to protect  
them against invasive species.**

#### Option 2:

**You've already got a handle  
on garlic mustard, but are you  
on the lookout for this new  
invader?**

An active and knowledgeable conservationist would probably ignore the first flier, assuming that the presentation would be about general information that they already know. But the second would seem more relevant for them. So even if the two types of fliers were displayed in the same location, the second one would be more likely to bring more active conservationists to your presentation. (Conversely, if your goal was to engage hitherto unengaged landowners, the first tagline would have been a better bet.)

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You could further increase the impact of your outreach by using selective channels. Identifying local landowners who have management plans is simple enough, but how do you know if they want to be local leaders in conservation? Perhaps local conservation organizations could help you reach area landowners who are able and willing to lead conservation efforts in the community. Through these groups, you might be able to make a targeted presentation to 20 local conservation leaders, all of whom would be able and ready to take the desired action.

Targeting doesn't have to be perfect for it to work—even small changes can improve the response rates to your messages. Furthermore, these small changes make it more likely that you will be able to attract and engage the people who are ready and able to take actions that will help you achieve your conservation goals.

### THE COSTS OF NOT TARGETING

Tailoring programs and messages to a particular audience segment can sometimes be difficult to practice because it appears to exclude landowners who are not part of your target audience. In reality, however, targeting doesn't mean excluding anyone—it means making a special effort to attract a particular kind of landowner.

Also, consider the alternative. When we don't tailor our programs to the needs and preferences of a specific audience segment, we usually end up developing materials for an audience that either looks like us or like the landowners whom we talk with most frequently. It is easy to see how this limits the scope of the project to "insiders"—i.e., people who are already informed about and committed to the issue. Targeting specific audiences is, therefore, essential for bringing new people—those who are not already part of the choir—into the program.

Sometimes, we do understand our audience and recognize the differences in their beliefs and attitudes on the issue. But we try to address the needs of all these audiences in one set of materials. The result is a hodgepodge that speaks a little bit to the needs of all audiences, but not strongly enough to drive action for any one of them. Sometimes, these materials send mixed messages, addressing one audience's needs in one sentence and saying the opposite to another audience in the next.

Consider this postcard text:



### Save the Gopher Tortoise. Grow the hunt.

Meet with your local forester to find out how you can manage your woods for multiple benefits, including creating habitat for endangered tortoises and making your hunt more productive and enjoyable.

Combining messages about saving the tortoise and improved hunting in a single postcard implies that the recipient cares about an endangered tortoise and wants to hunt other animals. There might be a few such folks out there, but the more likely scenario is that some of the landowners care about saving the gopher tortoise, while others are motivated to maximize hunting on their land. Therefore, developing two different postcards would allow you to make a more compelling argument to each type of landowner.

Choosing a target audience allows you to focus on their goals and values more sharply and, therefore, develop messages that resonate with them and compel action. Working with a specific landowner segment also helps you to tailor desired actions and supports to landowners' needs, knowledge, and resources.